GANḌHI, CHAMPARAN AND THE DOWNTRODDEN

*Ratneshwar Mishra**

A great tragedy is reflected in the fact that though forty eight years have passed since Mahatma Gandhi fell to the bullet of a fanatic Hindu assasin he still continues to be a riddle to quite many. If the fanatic Hindu killed him for being an appeaser of Muslims on 30th January 1948 and many like him considered him an out of way protagonist of the Muslims, many amongst the latter thought him to be a staunch Hindu communalist. Likewise, if the caste Hindus regard him as having defiled them by his deeds and thoughts in respect of the untouchables whom he called Harijans or the men of God, there are quite some amongst the latter who consider him as one who perpetuated the Brahminical dominance on Hindu society in the same fashion as an ancient Manu would have liked him to do. Any number of such paradoxes in popular perception of Gandhi can be cited but the fact remains that Ganchi's thought and deed continue to pervade the society in India. This in fact requires to be examined in some detail as to whether Gandhi deserved this treatment of being misunderstood by his countrymen or is it that only a few having some vested interests are trying to make the popular perception of Gandhi murky. Here this conflicting perception of Gandhi is sought to be examined in the context of his work at Champaran in Bihar.

As is well known, Gandhi had been invited in 1917 to Champaran by some well off peasants of the district to launch a movement against the indigo planters and thereby ameliorate their dwindling economic condition. The person responsible for taking him to Champaran was Rajkumar Shukla of Laukaria in Bettiah. He was a Brahman, a moneylender and a considerably prosperous peasant.[1] Among other local leaders to join Shukla in hosting Gandhi at Champaran were Sant Raut, again a well-to-to peasant who had formerly worked as planter's amla and Khendar Prasad Rai, yet another prosperous peasant-moneylender.[2] Gauri Shankar Shah, Hira Lal Sah, Devilal Sah, Ramdayal Prasad Shah, Lalita Prasad Shah, Punyadev Prasad Shah, Surajmal Marwari, Radhey Marwari, Rajaram Marwari and Bhagatumal of Bettiah and Ramu Marwari of Motihari etc. were some other local people who joined

* Prof. & Head, Department of History, L.N. Mishra University, Kameshwarnagar, Darbhanga (Bihar).

Gandhi prominently against the planters.[3] Yet others who rallied round Gandhi in Champaran included Wakilman Mishra and Babulal Mishra, the petty Zamindars of Karmawa. They had old connections with Bettiah Raj and held thika tenures.[4] They had been forced by planters to lease out portions of their zamindaris to them and this had considerably reduced their influence and status. The general grievances of the peasants against the indigo planters were many but the rich peasants had their special grievances also. The planters in fact offered cheap credit and interest free cash advances to the general peasants growing indigo. They also put obstacles in the free transfer of the holdings of insolvent peasants by giving them the benifit of their Zamindari rights. The planters thereby antagonised the rich peasants and the latter took up cudgels against them by inviting Gandhi to launch agitation against them.[5] The thriving moneylending business of the rich peasants can be understood from just one instance of the Bettiah Raj which, when fell under the charge of the Court of Wards owed Rs. 1,10847-15-7 to Gopal Shah of Mitihari.[6] Similarly Khendar Rai had a moneylending business of one lakh of rupees.[7] These moneylenders had their octopos like grip over the economy of the area. The poorer among the peasants and the downtrodden were their borrowers and they often suffered the loss of their lands to the moneylenders when they failed to pay off their debts. In Champaran it was this class which suffered and needed someone like Gandhi to lift them out of their deep morass but ironically it was the class of rich moneylender-peasants who assumed the role of wounded and pursuaded Gandhi to champion their cause.

It may further be made clear here that the examples of oppression by the Europeans was quite numerous yet poor farmers and agricultural labourers were explolited more by moneylender-peasants than by the planters. The latter may rather be credited to have provided succour to the oppressed. It is worthwhile to quote S.C. Bayley, the Divisional Commissioner of Patna.

"Indeed if we inquire among what classes it (indigo) is unpopular, we shall find that ... it is the favoured classes. Brahmins and Rajputs who hold their lands at favourable rates who have power and influence in the village from which they drive no small advantage who hate to see their position usurped by the factory amlah ... it is to these classes that indigo is specially hateful; and though they might be recouped for any pecuniary disadvantage by higher prices, this would pay for their loss."[8]

Girish Mishra in his study of the agrarian problems has at length made it clear that the presence of the planters was prejudicial only to the thriving peasants. Indigo brought cash to the peasants and thereby they did not have to lean on money-lenders. So long as they grew indigo the planters did not increase their rents. Indeed the planters stood guarantee against grabbing of poor peasants' landholdings by the moneylenders in satisfaction of loans advanced by them.[9] Thus, Gandhi's attack on indigo planters of Champaran was hardly in the interest

of the poor peasants. On the contrary it was in the interest of the class of moneylenders albeit they were not directly concerned with indigo cultivation. Their interest, however, could be served if the planters were made to depart. This easily explains the fact as to why the Shahs and Marwaris came out with material help to Gandhi and his movement in Champaran. They provided not only money but their houses and dharmshalas to Ganchi and his followers.

Apart from the moneylenders there were others who belonged to upper strata of rural society and carried on agricultural operations with the help of hired labour. Sheikh Gulab, Sital Rai and Sitaram Tiwari besides Khendar Rai, Rajkumar Shukla, Wakilman Mishra and Babulal Mishra hailed from this class. Their problem was that they did not get enough labourers for their agricultural operations because of the planters who lured most of them to work on their fields during the busy season.[10] It may be interesting to quote from a report of the Subdivisional Officer of Bettiah dated June 1, 1917 to show how the interests of these zamindars etc. clashed with those of the planters on the issue of securing labourers to work on their fields :

"The difficulty in Champaran is due, I think, to the larger demand for labour made by the European concerns and the superimposition of quasi-industrial system on the basis of zamindari custom. Some factories are happy in possessing villages which assume a regular supply of labourers (banihars). in villages, however, where there are large proportion of high castes, Brahmin or Rajputs tenants, the factory's demand for labour may clash with the ryots' own needs : but the first claim on available labour is exercised by the factory."[11]

Thus, the local leaders in a way exploited Gandhi's campaign in Champaran to further their interests and they were interested neither in helping the cause of the national movement nor the upliftment of the downtrodden. If it were so then those who criticise Gandhi of being a champion of the moneyed people have a point. These critics also cite various other examples of explointation perpetrated against the poor and deprived class of people. Any number of abwabs or illegal cesses were imposed on them by the Zamindars, Europeans as well as natives. The majority of them submitted to their sufferings quietly, only a handful knew how to resist the oppression. Did Gandhi do something to voice the grievances of this dumb section of the society which suffered primarily at the hands of those who were Gandhi's hosts at Champaran? .

Gandhi's fight at Champaran is basically seen as a tirade against colonial rule to secure political justice for his countrymen, but the principles guiding the demand for political justice are also advanced in favour of social justice.[12] Gandhi, emulating the national leaders like Gokhale and others, argued that since their demand for self government or independence from British rule was a democratic demand, the Indians should practise democracy in social sphere

also where the principles of equal liberty and equal rights of all must be applied.[13] National unity demanded equal rights and equal freedom for all indians be they the prosperous shahs, Marwari and others or the exploited marginal farmers and landless. Gandhi's vision in this regard was very clear. He felt that "independence will itself turn into bitter ashes in our mouth if the most useful section of the community is baulked of its essential rights." The moral and intellectual status of the community as a whole could be appreciably raised with the cooperation of all the classes forming the community.[14] Gandhi's Champaran venture is noteworthy in this regard too. It was here that he made his first successful experiment of Satyagraha after what he had already done in South Africa but what is more important is that here he also launched his multi-pronged attack for the salvation of the downtrodden classes.[15]

At Champaran Gandhi made unequivocal declaration that it was the moral obligation on the part of everyone concerned to work for the regeneration of the Harijans.[16] On the authority of Rajendra Prasad it can safely be said that the lot of the people of depressed classes including the Harijans had been made extremely miserable by the planters and representations made by the former time and again went unheeded.[17] A number of dedicated national leaders like Rajendra Prasad, Braj Kishore Prasad etc. accompanied Gandhi to Champaran and took up the cause of the downtrodden. Braj Kishore Prasad highlighted the miserable plight of the Harijans of Champaran in the meeting of the Bihar Provincial Conference held at Patna on 10th April 1914 and demanded enquiry into the entire gamut of exploitation of the downtrodden.[18] In January 1915 he took advantage of his participation in the Bihar Legislative Council debates and put forward several interpellations to emphasise the need for improving the situation of the Harijans. A number of contemporaty newspapers both from Bihar and outside published news items and articles to highlight the atrocities perpetrated by the European planters on the Harijans in Champaran.[19] In view of these evidences any charge made on Gandhi and his associates that they were not interested in furthering the cause of the downtrodden falls by the wayside.

In fact Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Champaran in 1917 opened a whole new world for the depressed people there. It is true that Gandhi's mission to Champaran was basically to wage a battle against the planters and theraby safeguard the interests of the indigo peasants like Rajkumar Shukla. It is not history that he eminently succeeded in his mission and paved the way for the government to legislate Champaran Agrarian Act for removing some of the grievances of the indigo peasants,[20] but in the process Gandhi had already set new agenda for himself at Champaran. He was expectedly moved to see the humiliating and inhuman plight of the Harijans there and immediately decided to work for them in preference to any other work.[21] He slowly but surely evolved his philosophy with regard to downtrodden classes

in the years to come. He underscored the fact that Hinduism in its pristine form had nothing to do with such social stigmas as untouchability. It was a violent social practice that was incompatible and contrary to the essentially non-violent character of Hinduism. He firmly believed that if Hinduism was to survive it had to dissociate itself completely from such evil and inhuman practices and only then the Hindus could consider themselves fit for Swaraj.[22] Gandhi was very clear in his mind that the people of downtrodden classes were men of God and service to them meant service to God. It was he who coined the term Harijan to give respectability to these men of God.[23] In order to achieve this aim he thought that such programmes of reform may be undertaken as gets the government, the enlightened people and the downtrodden involved for effectively promoting consciousness and education among them. He completely identified himself with the untouchables and it became his wont to stay in scavengers' colony insteed of palatial buildings. While presiding over at a conference of suppressed classes at Ahmedabad he said,

> "If I have to be reborn, I should be born as an untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings, and the affronts levelled at them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from the miserable condition."[24]

In his many campaigns against the evil of untouchability he could clearly perceive that the chief stumbling bloc in the path of the resurgence of the downtrodden classes was their illiteracy and ignorance and, therefore, he felt that spread of education among them must get top most priority in any agenda for improving their lot. He favoured opening of primary schools in remote villages. He had a great Charismatic personality. The moment he made an appeal for enrolment as voluntary teachers in different parts of the country to man these schools there were persons ready to oblige.[25] On 8 November 1917 he returned to Champaran with a group of enlightened and selfless men and women from Gujarat and Maharashtra, where social reform work for the depressed classes had been going on for several years under the auspices of the Prarthana Samaj, the Deccan Education Society and the Servants of India Society. It is remarkable here that Gandhi had given explicit instructions to these volunteers not to involve themseves with the grievances against the planters or other political matters. The government, therefore, had no objection to these volunteers working for the educational betterment of the depressed people.[26] Gandhiji started his first primary school on 14 November 1917 in a village named Barharwa Lakhansen situated at a distance of 20 miles east of Motihari town. Shivagulam Lal of that village gave his house and financial support for running the School. The volunteers undertook the work of repairing wells and cleaning the drains so that the poor villagers got uncontaminated water.[27] The Harijan boys and girls were also given industrial training with a view to enabling them to earn their bread.[28] The adults were taught the ways of maintaining personal hygiene and sanitation.[29] Some more schools were opened

in Bheetwara village in the Nepal terai, 40 miles north west of Bettiah town[30] and also in village Madhuban where a merchant named Ghanshyam Das gave his house for the purpose. Some of those who had volunteered to work as teachers in these schools included such distinguished names as Narhari Dwarkadas Parikh, his wife Manibai Parikh, Mahadeva Haribhai Desai, his wife Durgabai, Acharya J.B. Kripalani, Vishnu Seetaram Randive alias Appaji etc.[31] A girls school was started under the supervision of Anandibai, the sister of Dr. Deva of the Servants of India Society. Kasturba Gandhi herself started awareness campaign among the Harijan Women about their rights and duties. Apart from learning to read write the village women gathered in these schools for prayer and spinning. Everything was done in the schools to motivate the women to discard such social evils as purdah.[32]

Apart from activities in the schools the volunteers also undertook to work for the betterment of the society elsewhere also. Medical camps were opened in Mithiharia and its surrounding villages under the guidance of Dr. Deva. He was chief of the medical unit. Such medicines as castor oil, quinine, sulphur ointment etc. were distributed free of cost among the Harijans, who had hardly money to get themselves treated by private doctors. Dr. Deva and his associates also cleaned roads, drains and wells in Harijan villages whenever they found time for the same. People were encouraged to go to other villages and undertake similar work of hygiene and cleanliness.[33]

All this endeared Gandhi to the people of depressed classes and definite awakening dawned upon them. When Gandhi visited Champaran after a brief interval on 27 January 1918, he was accorded a warm welcome. The downtrodden people from other parts also started approaching him to help them ameliorate their lot too. The example of the sweepers of Chapra municipality can be citied in this connection. Though Gandhi's stay at Champaran was rather short, he succeeded in creating tremendous impression on the minds of the Harijans. He also succeeded in teaching them to be organaized and to protest without fear against all exploitations. They were now able to see the utility of education and send their children to schools so that they could lead better life.[34] A still more welcome development was that the people of higher classes got enthused to follow the path shown by Gandhi and started getting themeselves enrolled as volunteers for the purpose of going to remote villages to acquaint the Harijans with their social rights.[35]

Thus seen, Gandhi had been brought to Champaran by people belonging to a powerful section of Zamindar-moneylender class whose interest were in jeopardy due to the presence of the indigo planters as the latter proved a source of relief to the people belonging to the working and oppressed class. The hosts of Gandhi at Champaran were the real perpetrators of systematic exploitation of the depressed class. They sought to ensure that those who were

the rear factors in productive system were kept perpetually deprived so that they always depended upon them for the fulfilment of their smallest needs. In this view of the matter Gandhi seems to be an ally of the native exploiters who had planned to utilize him for expelling the planters and thereby keep their control intact on the downtrodden. But this is an onesided, if not outright perverted, view of Gandhi's work and personality. The peculiar characteristic of Indian freedom movement as wonderfully epitomised in Gandhi, is that it was simultaneously a battle against the alien colonial rule as well as against manifold social evils. Gandhi was equally truthful in this fight against both. Hence irrespective of the motives of his hosts at Champaran he launched his attack both against the planters, symbol of colonial exploitation, as well as against social evils like untouchability and illiteracy. Gandhi's success against British imperialism is unanimously acknowledged but there are people who view his contructive work or the work for the establishment of social justice and removal of social inequalities and evils as failure particularly in the context of Champaran. As already seen Gandhi was indeed successful somewhat in ameliorating the condition of the downtrodden in Champaran albeit his stay there was very brief. It may be instructive to quote Gandhi to explain as to how he himself evaluated his constructive work at Champaran :

> "But I must confess with regret that my hope of putting this constructive work on a permanent footing was not fulfilled. The voluteers had come for temporary periods. I could not secure any more from outside, and permanent honorary workers from Bihar were not available. As soon as my work in Champaran was finished, work outside which had been preparing in the meantime, drew me away. The few months work in Champaran, however, took such deep root that its influence in one form or another is to be observed there even today."[36]

In conclusion it may be said that Gandhi was never narrow-minded. His work at Champaran—whether his fight against the tyranny of the white planters or his fight for the moral and material betterment of the oppressed classes—should be viewed as part of his general work for regeneration of human-beings. While writing about Gandhi's relevance in modern India, an Australian Stephen Murphy, who styles himslef as western Gandhian, says,

> "He was undoubtedly concerned with the whole of humanity...And he clearly wanted to bring about first in India and later elsewhere, a fundamental revolution in how societies were ordered and how human beings related to each other and their world[37]. Just as the teachings of Bhagvad Gita relate to all historical period (and are regarded as such by all), equally the principles and beliefs for which Gandhi stands belong to no one period of history. They are equally timeless."[38]

Indeed Champaran in 1917 and thereabout was one of the first places in India where Gandhi undertook his task of moral regeneration of mankind, but definitely he aimed to encompass the whole world and all the ages. His vision was universal.

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